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Our Friends, Our Lovers, Our Parents, Ourselves—and Approval

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Jacksonville State University

Correspondence concerning this editorial should be addressed to J. Patrick McGrail, Ph.D.,
Jacksonville State University, Department of Communication, 700 Pelham Road North,
Jacksonville, AL 36265.

Contact: creativeworksubiquity@gmail.com

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It is possible to sail through this world without caring what other people think, and some believe that such a *voyage* is truly “*bon*” and highly desirable. They argue that our rugged individualism should never be tintured with even a tiny measure of “How will what I am about to do look to others?” Damn the torpedoes, and all that. Nevertheless, if we are honest with ourselves, we both seek and need approval—approval from those who raised us, from those who love us now as peers, and from authority figures, the last if only to have peace and continued employment.

Some of us need approval from others whom they may never meet—I’m thinking of politicians. It must truly be emotionally perilous to stand or fall on the approbation of some unknown quantity of thousands or millions of voters, who may render their appreciation or disavowal for the smallest of courtesies or peccadilloes, some of which may be dubious or worse yet, completely untrue. Or the politician may be pressured to resign, again because he/she has run afoul of the law, or rules, or a campaign for clean government. The problem for that person, again, is lack of approval.

Perhaps we are all judges, despite the Biblical warning to avoid being one. If we all judge to some extent, we render or withhold approval from any number of people in our lifetimes, whether that be the security guard at a concert we’ve been ejected from or a lover who has jilted us. I do not believe I have ever heard from anyone the following statement: “My boy/girlfriend who broke up with me was totally justified in doing so; I would have done the same in his/her shoes.” Even when we acknowledge trouble in our relationship with someone, we often accord the blame to the other person, even as we hold ourselves (usually, mostly) blameless. But I believe that somewhere within us, we know that the other person may hold the same not-exactly-

lofty opinion of us. Our disagreement leaves both of us fruitlessly seeking approval from each other, even as we scoff and sputter our disinterest.

Approval is most enthusiastically stamped on others whom we love. For a time, all of us eagerly go on approving the object of our young loves, at least until that love does something we do not feel we can forgive. While it is oft said that only love can produce a subsequently bitter hatred, some souls live to see approval turn to the bitter autumn of disenchantment, only to find a spring of approval once again. Forgiveness, like hope, can spring eternal, but you've got to do some excavation of the spring's font first. That requires perspective, and time, and the deep understanding that we are all desperately flawed, yet desperately needing that which we all hold in abeyance from one another, yes, you guessed it: approval.

Children are perhaps most in need of the approval of those they love, because those they love most keenly are their parents. It is their parents who are the architects of their young lives, who set the conditions under which they play, laugh, study, learn and love. Such a strong bond is rarely ever completely severed. Even grown children frequently find themselves assenting to their parents' wishes, even when they believe that doing so is either unhelpful for them, or for their parents. Perhaps worse, grown children find themselves unconsciously doing things that their parents have not specifically requested, but which they do out of hope for their parents' approval in some future that may never come.

In the moving play, *I Never Sang for My Father* (Anderson, 1968, p. 1), the protagonist, Gene, states a profound truth of the unravelable Gordian tie he feels for his father: "Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor's mind toward some resolution, which it may never find."

David Harscheid is peculiarly sensitive to this parental relationship, as he recalls a humorous and quirky moment when he and his dad get in trouble for laughing out of turn. This moment forms within their otherwise uncertain relationship a strong bond. Give his “What’s Playing at the Roxy?” a good read. It’s a hoot, and sad in parts, too.

Reneé Schattelman is another of our talented stalwarts who, among other themes, explores what happens when we seek approval of something dearly wanted from a lover and are not rewarded. She finds another purpose for an ancient Greek dictum and soldiers on. “Chilon of Sparta” is an excellent read.

A new author, Camea Davis, again among other threads, explores the many gifts her mother gave her, including recognition, obviously by lived experience, of the “gravity of oppression” and in response to it, to be both “sturdy rock and molten liquid.” It’s an inspiring poem, and it’s called “Civic-Critical Literacy.”

To approve and to be approved is to both be the sun and bask in it. As human beings, we have those twin luxuries. But the sun is out far too infrequently. And when approval from those we love is withheld from us, watch out. Time seems not to matter, where affairs of the heart are concerned.

Singer/songwriter Chris Rea recalls: “And the years go past/Just like the old song says/The pain with time has healed, it couldn’t last/But oh a friend like a fool/Mentions your name/Sunny days, drunken nights,/You smile and say, it’s alright/But oh the cold cold rain/At the mention of your name” (Rea, 1991).

So much of literature explores themes like these, and they never bore, no matter how often they appear, bedecked as they are in the sundry raiments of different details. One common term is “Approval Junkie,” which is the title of a book by Faith Salie (2016). The approval of

others is so important to her that she agonizes over the correct outfit to wear to her divorce proceedings. A brother betrays, a mother belittles, a father belays. It is all a search for, and in tragedies, the failure of approval. And we are not by nature, it seems, such sunny creatures that we will ever tire of these tales. I suppose that I wish we could think of them more as adages or maxims that would smooth and correct our own judgmental and unapproving behavior than as a sad acceptance of our flawed need to be hypercritical, and at the same time, desperate for the approval of those we love.

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Author Bio: J. Patrick McGrail is Associate Professor of Communication at Jacksonville State University. He teaches electronic news, media literacy, and video and film production. Prior to his career in academia, McGrail worked in television and radio as an actor and director. He has a research program in copyright and media literacy, has a keen interest in poetry and music production, and holds a number of musical copyrights himself.